

## Metropolitan King County Council

Carolyn Edmonds, *District 1*  
Bob Ferguson, *District 2*  
Kathy Lambert, *District 3*  
Larry Phillips, *District 4*  
Dwight Pelz, *District 5*  
Rob McKenna, *District 6*  
Pete von Reichbauer, *District 7*  
Dow Constantine, *District 8*  
Stephen Hammond, *District 9*  
Larry Gossett, *District 10*  
Jane Hague, *District 11*  
David W. Irons, *District 12*  
Julia Patterson, *District 13*



**Cheryle A. Broom**  
*King County Auditor*

516 Third Avenue, Room W1020  
Seattle, WA 98104-3272

(206) 296-1655  
TTY 296-1024

## MANAGEMENT LETTER

DATE: February 10, 2004

TO: Metropolitan King County Councilmembers

FROM: Cheryle A. Broom, County Auditor

SUBJECT: Follow-up on Implementation of Recommendations from 2002 Performance Audit of Sheriff's Communications Center

This memorandum provides the results of our follow-up review of our 2002 Sheriff's Communications Center performance audit.

### **Background**

In 2002, the auditor's office completed a performance audit of the Sheriff's Communications Center (Comm Center) whose objectives were to determine the reasons for the Comm Center's declining performance, staffing difficulties, and rising overtime. We found that while the Comm Center's operations were soundly designed, it had experienced operating difficulties in recent years that were caused by:

- Increases and changes in workload.
- An expansion of responsibilities without staff increases or workload adjustments.
- Staff management practices that needed revision and updating to reflect current staffing needs and workload demands.

The audit made recommendations to enhance workload monitoring, pursue options for relieving dispatcher and communication system workload, and strengthen staff management methods.

### **Summary**

This follow-up study focused on reviewing whether our audit's recommendations have been implemented. Since the conclusion of our audit in April 2002, the Comm Center's 911 call-answering performance has improved and many of our audit's recommendations have been, or are in the process of being, implemented. In addition, overtime hours worked have dropped and the vacancy rate has improved. This is due to a reduction in turnover and, consistent with our audit recommendation, the increased recruitment and training efforts undertaken by management.

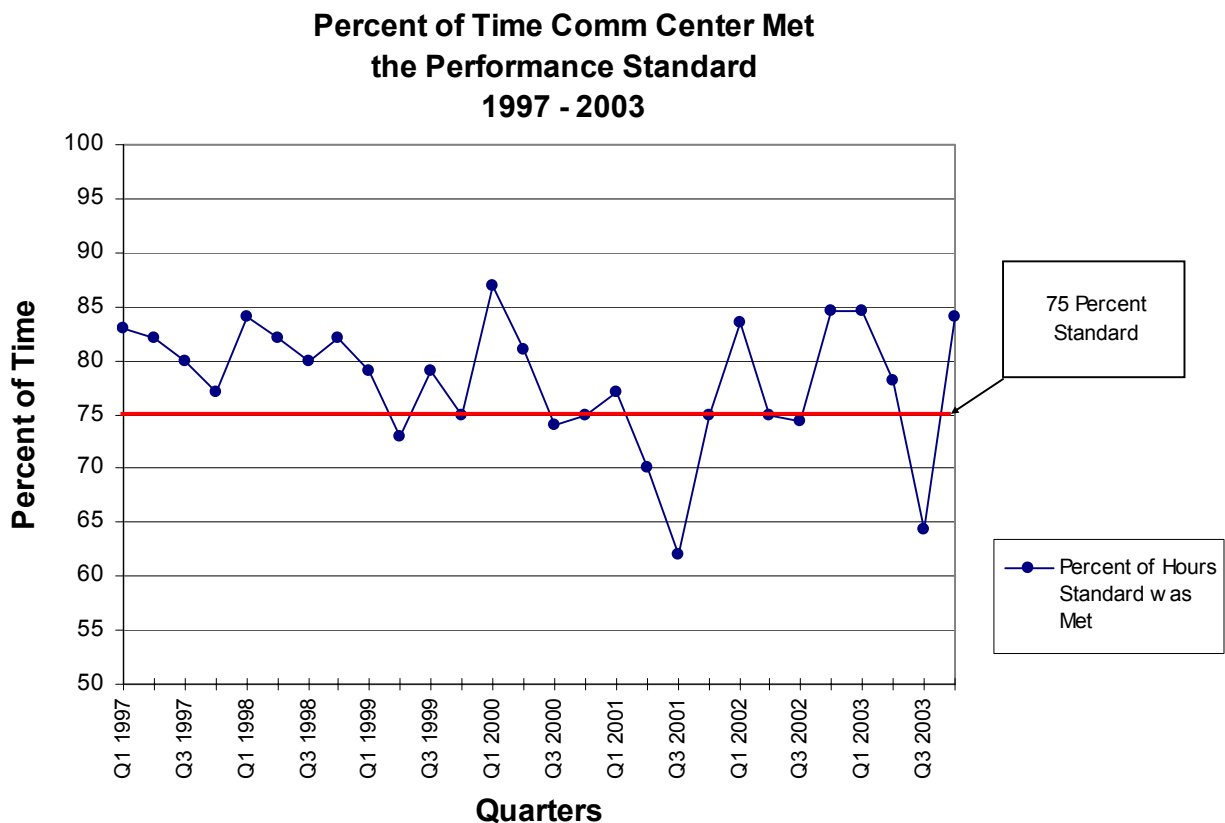
Our workload monitoring and staffing analysis recommendations are just now being implemented due to the priority Comm Center management has placed on coordinating their recent move to the new Regional Communications and Emergency Coordination Center (RCECC) in Renton. This absence of ongoing workload monitoring and staffing analysis was a

primary cause of the performance difficulties that prompted our original audit. Because it is necessary to have these management practices in place to prevent such difficulties from occurring again, we are recommending that the Comm Center make completion of this project a priority.

## **Conclusions**

### *Call-Answering Performance*

As one of the King County Emergency Management Division's (EMD) Public Safety Answering Points, the Comm Center is required to answer 90 percent of its calls in 10 seconds or less, 75 percent of the time. As was described in our audit, in 2000 and 2001 the Comm Center experienced a substantial decline in its ability to answer its 911 calls within this performance standard, and EMD temporarily withheld Comm Center funding until its performance improved the following quarter.<sup>1</sup> Its record has improved since then, and as can be seen in the chart below, it was able to exceed the call-answering standard during six out of eight quarters in 2002 and 2003. This is an improvement over its performance in 2000 and 2001 and is close to the performance achieved during the late 1990s.



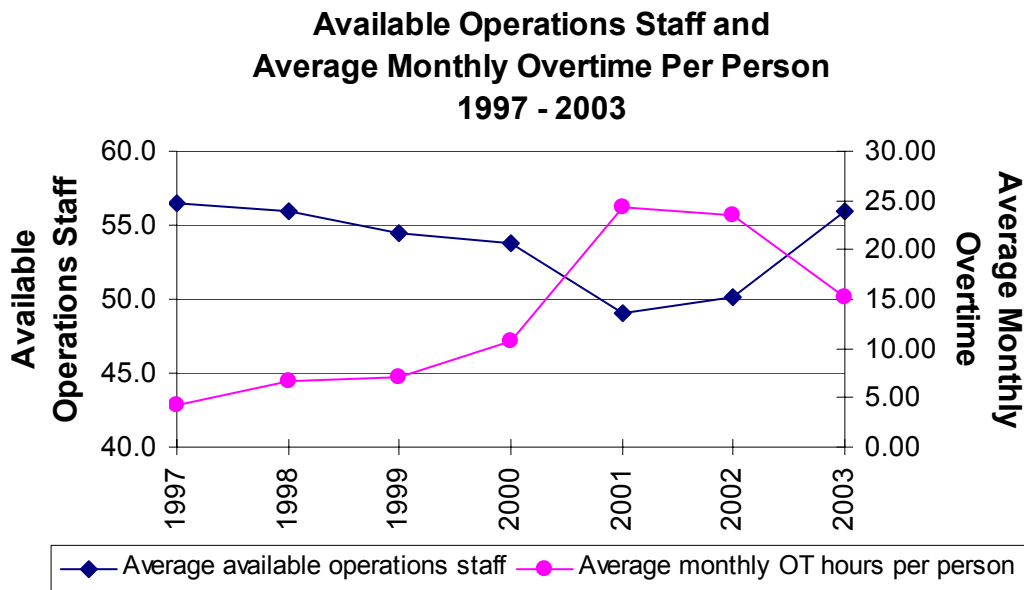
As the chart shows, the Comm Center missed the 75 percent call-answering standard during two of the last eight quarters: by one percent during the third quarter of 2002 and by 11 percent in the third quarter of 2003. This latter decline in performance occurred during the months immediately following the Comm Center's move to their new location at the RCECC. Management explained that the employee learning curve associated with learning a new phone system was the primary reason for the decline in call-answering promptness. Recent data for

<sup>1</sup> \$59,628 was withheld in September 2001, and was released in January 2002.

the last quarter of 2003 shows that performance has improved and is once again above the standard. Because these two quarters were not consecutive the Comm Center's E-911 funding was not withheld.

#### *Staffing*

The staffing concerns identified in our audit have been largely resolved. Consistent with our audit recommendation, Comm Center management addressed its high turnover and vacancy rates by increasing its recruitment efforts. Staff turnover has also decreased, and the result is higher, more stable, operational staffing levels. As of December 2003, their vacancy rate was at zero, although it increased to four positions in February 2004. In addition, the higher staffing levels have enabled the Comm Center to reduce the amount of overtime worked by 40 percent, from an average of 24 hours per month per person down to 15. The chart below demonstrates how overtime has decreased in recent years as operational staffing levels have risen.



Our 2002 audit determined that when responsibility for Metro Transit Police Dispatch was assigned to the Comm Center in 2000, the Comm Center did not receive enough additional staff or funding to cover the positions. Management thus had to reassign staff from existing core responsibilities, such as precinct dispatching and call-receiving, to cover the new dispatch position. This resulted in additional overtime expenditures and made it more difficult for them to meet their 911 phone coverage staffing levels. In accordance with our recommendation, the Sheriff's Office requested and received additional Metro-backed revenue and FTEs for the 2003 budget, saving the current expense fund approximately \$175,000. Additionally, the Sheriff's Office intends to implement our recommendation to resume use of the "vapor positions," which will minimize the time a position is vacant.<sup>2</sup> These changes will increase operational staffing levels, which is expected to further improve performance, relieve workload pressures, and reduce overtime requirements.

<sup>2</sup> Vapor positions enable the Comm Center to hire and train employees in anticipation of future vacancies, and have them all or part of the way through the six-month new hire training program by the time the next vacancy occurs.

### *Workload*

The Comm Center is just beginning to implement our recommendations to realign its call-receiver staffing with changing call volume patterns and to improve its monitoring and analysis of workload. This absence of workload monitoring and staffing needs analysis was a primary cause of the performance difficulties that prompted our original audit, and it is necessary to have these management practices in place to prevent such difficulties from occurring again. Management began this effort at the conclusion of our audit in 2002; however, the coordination of their recent move to the new RCECC in Renton took priority over these projects.

Since the conclusion of this follow-up study, management has again resumed its efforts to realign staffing levels with updated 911 call volumes and their performance targets, and to implement improved workload monitoring practices. The new telephone software at the RCECC has powerful reporting capabilities that were absent from the old system at the county courthouse, which is expected to strengthen their ability to analyze call receiver workload and staffing. However, difficulties with the new software are currently interfering with the collection of call-receiver performance and workload data. Comm Center management is currently working with the EMD, the phone companies, and software vendor to resolve the software reporting difficulties. In addition, for technical reasons, dispatcher workload data has been historically difficult to access, and management has not yet implemented routine workload monitoring. However, data on major workload indicators, such as the number of dispatched calls for service and on-views handled by dispatchers, is currently available, and radio "talk time," another important workload indicator, will soon be more easily accessible to Comm Center management. The Comm Center intends to complete its staffing and workload analysis, resolve these reporting difficulties, and implement improved workload monitoring practices during the first half of 2004.

### **Follow-up Recommendations:**

1. The Comm Center should make its call receiver realignment and workload monitoring projects a priority.
2. Comm Center management should provide a progress report on implementing the remaining audit recommendations to the Auditor's Office by August 1, 2004.

Liz DuBois, Senior Management Auditor, conducted this management review. Please contact Liz at 296-0377 or me at 296-1655 if you have any questions about the issues discussed in this letter.

AManagement Letter.doc

cc: David G. Reichert, King County Sheriff  
Pat Lee, Chief, Technical Services  
Shelley Sutton, Policy Staff Director  
Mike Alvine, Lead Legislative Analyst, LOT  
Rebecha Cusack, Lead Legislative Analyst, BFM